

BOOKS AHOY!

—KAMLESH MOHINDRA

It was the annual day of Mira Nursery School at Sri Aurobindo Ashram. As the little ones queued up in their gorgeous costumes, they stole a glance at us while we stood at a stall filled with picture books right in front of the hall. Imagine the delight of those toddlers whose parents stopped, browsed and decided to buy a 'Well done' present for them. What better gift can one think of than an attractive book with good quality text, meant just for that age and also at a reasonable price?

One morning in Manorama Jafa's office, the idea was born. As a matter of fact it was her brain wave that set Sudha, Ritu (both are illustrators) and me into action. We all agreed with Mrs. Jafa that the books written by Indian authors with a text projecting an Indian background and with charming and adequate illustrations must reach the little readers. To make these available to

people we couldn't think of a campus better than the green and serene surroundings of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, which has two nursery schools, one primary school and one secondary school.

With a car-load of books from the AWIC office, away we went to show them off to the little ones. Happily, the sale on the first day was so encouraging that we applied to the authorities again to be allowed to put up the stall at Mira Nursery on the 6th and 7th of April.

These first two days happened to be the most significant mornings for the toddlers beginning their lives as students. A number of parents picked up books for their precious ones to say 'thank you for being so good on the first day'. A number of screamers got diverted by the glitter of colourful covers of books spread across the low tables under the trees. One little girl decided it was more exciting to browse than stay in the classroom. So she remained glued to the books almost all morning! The children who had felt most reluctant to come to school felt encouraged when they received the gift of books from their parents. 'School isn't such a bad place' was perhaps one of the thoughts running in their little minds.

Most of the parents agreed that the books were a good bargain and excellent value for their money. Mr. Shankar's *The Scare* (CBT) seemed a popular choice. One little girl struck us as rather forceful when she dug the shopping money out of the domestic servant's pocket just to be able to possess the exciting animal book. Many children wanted lions and birds. One little boy howled his eyes out because we hadn't brought any book on his favourite Pussy cat.

Twice we put up our stall at Mother's International on the occasion of their Parent Teacher Meetings. Here we had a rival. A professional distributor had put up his stall where he had displayed hundreds of books—foreign as well as Indian. There were colouring books, quiz books

and activity books galore. And all these sold like hot cakes.

On the other hand we had a steady flow of customers. As the parents browsed, they chatted as well. Some of them commented about the absence of fantasy, adventure and mystery books. The sets of short stories went very fast. Interesting science oriented books were much in demand but we could only present limited titles. People even asked for Maths fun books but we could only offer them *The Story of Zero* (CBT). This was appreciated by slightly older children. Parents were frantically searching for activity books to keep their children busy during the holidays.

There is no saying what books will sell better and when. Just when we had given up hopes of selling *Bal Shabd Kosh* (AWIC) and lugged just a few to the stall, the crowd of demanding customers closed in on us. While Sudha manned the stall, I drove home at breakneck speed to fetch some more copies, dodging the cars in an overcrowded car park and on a jam-packed crossing. It took me fifteen minutes to return instead of five! The customers had waited patiently. We man-

aged to sell quite a few that morning.

Is there much profit in this exercise? By the looks of it there is more fun to be had than money. The excitement in the child's eye when he holds his parcel of newly purchased books is rewarding enough. The fact that the right kind of book is going into his hands is very satisfying. This is a slow but sure method of making certain parents aware of the importance of books outside the curriculum. It's a small beginning, but who knows? The little rivulet might broaden at a point and render the plains fertile!

The modest profit made from these books is not touched. It goes into a kitty for the future. When we have made a substantial amount, the activities will be increased. We plan to go into publishing in a very modest way just to help those authors and illustrators who despite being good, don't make it. This scheme might add a little cheer into the lives of quite a few as we plan to do it all at a minimum possible cost.

Intentions are good and plans are ambitious. So we deserve all the blessings and lots of luck of course. By the way, we don't have a name for this project. Can you help?

The book has as much of a future now as it has had for the past hundreds of years. New generations will continue to emerge but there will also always be children who want to read. For them it is the world of future.

Hannu Makela